Alphabet of Sirach

The ***Alphabet of ben Sirach*** (*Alphabetum Siracidis*, *Otijot ben Sira*, *Alpha Beta la-Ben Sira*) is an anonymous text of the Middle Ages inspired by the Hellenistic work known as the *Sirach*. Its date of authorship is estimated to have been anywhere between 700 and 1000 CE. It is a compilation of two lists of proverbs, 22 in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and 22 in Mishnaic Hebrew, both arranged as alphabetic acrostics. Each proverb is followed by a Haggadic commentary. The work has been characterized as satire, and it contains references to masturbation, incest and flatulence. The text has been translated into Latin, Yiddish, Judaeo-Spanish, French and German. A partial English translation appeared in Stern and Mirsky (1998).

Adam clutches a child in the presence of the child-snatcher Lilith.

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Aramaic proverbs

The Aramaic proverbs are the far older part of the book. Five of them can be traced to Talmudic-Midrashic literature. The Hebrew commentary, illustrating the proverbs with fables, is much younger.

in the reading of Ginzberg:

1. "Honor the physician before thou hast need of him", (Sirach 38:1)
2. "If a son do not conduct himself like a son, let him float on the water."
3. "Gnaw the bone that falls to thy lot whether it be good or bad."
4. "Gold must be hammered, and the child must be beaten."
5. "Be good and refuse not thy portion of good."
6. "Woe to the wicked man and woe to his companions."
7. "Cast thy bread upon the waters and upon the land, for thou shalt find it after many days" (Eccles. 11:1)
8. "Hast thou seen a black ass? [Then] it was neither black nor white."
9. "Bestow no good upon that which is evil, and no evil will befall thee."
10. "Restrain not thy hand from doing good."
11. "The bride enters the bridal chamber and, nevertheless, knows not what will befall her."

12. "A nod to the wise is sufficient; the fool requires a blow." (Proverbs 22:15)
13. "He who honors them that despise him is like an ass."
14. "A fire, when it is kindled, burns many sheaves" (James 3:5)
15. "An old woman in the house is a good omen in the house"
16. "Even a good surety has to be applied to for a hundred morrows; a bad one for a hundred thousand."
17. "Rise quickly from the table and thou wilt avoid disputes."
18. "In thy business deal only with the upright."
19. "If the goods are near at hand, the owner consumes them; but if they are at a distance, they consume him."
20. "Do not disavow an old friend."
21. "Thou mayest have sixty counselors, but do not give up thy own opinion"
22. "He that was first satisfied and then hungry will offer thee his hand; but not he that was first hungry and then satisfied."

The second Alphabet

The 22 Hebrew proverbs are quite different in character from the Aramaic ones, and much more recent. Half of the proverbs are borrowed from the Talmud, and are only a pretext for the presentation of a number of legends surrounding Ben Sira. Ben Sira is presented as the son of Jeremiah. Ben Sira's fame reached Nebuchadnezzar II, who called him to his court. Nebuchadnezzar sets forth various ordeals for Ben Sira, who responds with 22 stories. Some of the fables of the collection are indebted to Christian legend, and to the Indian *Panchatantra*.

Lilith

The text is best known because of its reference to Lilith, and it is the fifth of Ben Sira's responses to King Nebuchadnezzar. It is reproduced here in its entirety:

> Soon afterward the young son of the king took ill. Said Nebuchadnezzar, "Heal my son. If you don't, I will kill you." Ben Sira immediately sat down and wrote an amulet with the Holy Name, and he inscribed on it the angels in charge of medicine by their names, forms, and images, and by their wings, hands, and feet. Nebuchadnezzar looked at the amulet. "Who are these?"
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> "The angels who are in charge of medicine: [סנוי סנסנוי וסמנגלוף] (in English: Senoy, Sansenoy and Semangelof). While God created Adam, who was alone, He said, 'It is not good for man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). He also created a woman, from the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith. Adam and Lilith immediately began to fight. She said, 'I will not lie below,' and he said, 'I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be the superior one.' Lilith responded, 'We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth.' But they would not listen to one another. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced the Ineffable Name and flew away into the air. Adam stood in prayer before his Creator: 'Sovereign of the universe!' he said, 'the woman you gave me has run away.' At once, the Holy One, blessed be He, sent these three angels to bring her back.
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> "Said the Holy One to Adam, 'If she agrees to come back, what is made is good. If not, she must permit one hundred of her children to die every day.' The angels left God and pursued Lilith, whom they overtook in the midst of the sea, in the mighty waters wherein the Egyptians

> were destined to drown. They told her God's word, but she did not wish to return. The angels said, 'We shall drown you in the sea.'
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> "'Leave me!' she said. 'I was created only to cause sickness to infants. If the infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth, and if female, for twenty days.'
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> "When the angels heard Lilith's words, they insisted she go back. But she swore to them by the name of the living and eternal God: 'Whenever I see you or your names or your forms in an amulet, I will have no power over that infant.' She also agreed to have one hundred of her children die every day. Accordingly, every day one hundred demons perish, and for the same reason, we write the angels' names on the amulets of young children. When Lilith sees their names, she remembers her oath, and the child recovers."[1]

Jewish scholars have written arguments urging for Lilith's depiction in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* to be reevaluated, based on the fact that this text was originally written primarily as a work of satire. Although the negativity surrounding Lilith's character as a demoness (i.e. terrorising pregnant women, fornicating with demons, murdering infants, etc.) was taken with a varying degree of superstition within Judaism, it should not go unrecognized that much of the work was probably intended satirically.[2]

Some scholars have written arguments recognizing the satire as a way to clearly understand the social anxieties that lie at the center of the *Alphabet*, particularly as embodied by Lilith:

> Lilith is a ready scapegoat—a demonic, powerful, sexual woman onto whom blame for sexual impropriety can easily be placed. In this way, conceptions of Lilith actually create the space for deviance from the sexual norm, providing Jewish men with not only an explanation for their "impure" thoughts or actions, but even a justification.[3]

Some other scholars argue that the satirical tone of the composition makes it even more difficult to assess the value of Lilith. The ruthlessly parodic tone of the *Alphabet* suggests that the blade of criticism is actually directed against Adam, who turns out to be weak and ineffective in his relations with his wife. Apparently, the first man is not the only male figure who is mocked: Even the Holy One cannot subjugate Lilith and needs to ask his messengers, who only manage to go as far as negotiating the conditions of the agreement. Lilith is approached in her own dwelling by the divine emissaries, themselves a miserable reflection of the four majestic angels of the Enochian tradition. Thus, even if the *Alphabet* should not be treated as a manifesto of female empowerment, Lilith is presented therein as the strongest and most influential character from among her literary companions.[4]

Editions

- Salonica, 1514, two known surviving copies
- Constantinople, 1519, one known complete copy in the British Library, a defective one at the Bodleian, and another defective one in Basel.
- Venice, 1544, reprinted by Steinschneider, 1854; most later editions are based on this one.

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